The graves of academe

Kenneth Minogue

ALLAN BLOOM
The Closing of the American Mind: How higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students. 392pp. Simon and Schuster. £14.95. 0671479903

Early in *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom tells us that the undergraduates he teaches arrive at the university equipped with one unshakeable conviction: that truth is relative. All the influences upon them agree about the relativity of values, and no point of view is better than any other. The old idea of a liberal education has turned insensibly into an education for liberals. The aim is perhaps to release the young from their prejudices; the actual consequence, Bloom argues, has been to spread shallowness and apathy.

The Closing of the American Mind explores this situation in depth. It is a book hard to classify, because it mixes Bloom's own experiences teaching in American universities with philosophical argument, sociological generalization with the history of ideas. Moving from level to level, it steadily reveals itself as something immensely more ambitious than a mere jeremiad about the deficiencies of youth: it is nothing less than an attempt to chart the crisis of Western civilization. In particular, it focuses on the way in which nineteenth-century German philosophy has taken possession of American culture. So dramatic a thesis no doubt accounts for the book's success in the United States; yet as an analysis of the character of modernity, it is also relevant to European experience.

Bloom finds something very wrong with contemporary intellectual and academic culture, whose grand shibboleth of criticism, he contends, has paradoxically produced intolerance and dogmatism. His exploration of the paradoxes of contemporary liberation is the most fully elaborated yet to appear. His focus is, however, not merely on the history of ideas, but particularly on ideas in political philoso-

conveys that no one set of values is better than any other. A shallow contentment is the current result. It is illustrated by an Atlanta taxi driver Bloom cites who, having been released from prison for dope-peddling, had undergone all kinds of therapy: "But what I liked best was *Gestalt*". The very use of the German word provokes Bloom to remark that such cultural tokens have become as natural as chewing-gum on American streets, and he continues:

> He said he had found his identity and learned to like himself. A generation earlier he would have found God and learned to despise himself as a sinner. The problem lay with his sense of *self*, not with any original sin or devils in him. We have here the peculiarly American way of digesting Continental despair. It is nihilism with a happy ending.

To understand what is really happening to America, one must go back to Heidegger and Nietzsche. It was Nietzsche who criticized democracy as a world in which, since nobody actually believes in anything any more, everyone spends his life in frenzied work and frenzied play so as not to face the fact, not to look into the abyss.

This is "philosophy" criticizing "democracy" and no one can understand Bloom's drift who does not quickly realize that, to him, these and other terms have special meanings. "Democracy" describes what Tocqueville studied as the culture of the Americans, but its dominant sense derives from Plato's *Republic*, where it stands for a necessarily unstable form of social life which has rejected all forms of discrimination between the better and the worse. The other essential key lies in realizing that by "philosophy" Bloom means not what is taught in most professional departments of philosophy, but the moral and intellectual tradition whose great hero and martyr was Socrates. Philosophy is the discovery, traditionally first made by Thales (who fell into a well because he was looking at the stars) that the world is intelligible. This is an exhilarating discovery because it can liberate the mind from dependence upon

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however, not merely on the history of ideas, but particularly on ideas in political philosophy. In Bloom's historic landscape, a work like Machiavelli's *Prince* is far more important than the French Revolution, which was largely the outcome of an ill-considered philosophical project. His intellectual élitism is just as thorough-going as the Marxism which he sees as having begun to destroy the university in the 1960s.

Bloom's account of the shallow intellectuality of the average American undergraduate is hair-raising. He believes that restraints on sex are pre-eminent among the moral points of view which have been reduced to the democracy of values. Consequently, as in all liberations, sex has been devalued; even tamed and banal sex now finds itself subjected to feminist imperatives to destroy the attraction between the sexes. He also argues persuasively that popular music, the dominant preoccupation of the young, is a narcotic which cuts them off from each other no less than from their elders.

Much of what Bloom has to say about today's undergraduates has been said before, usually by people who explain it in terms of commercialism, television, the collapse of family values and so on. Bloom puts it all down to bad philosophy. The real culprit is not so much Marx as Max Weber, whose value-relativism was translated into the American patois of "lifestyles", and came to be echoed in numberless popular books and movies. Thus he remarks that Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* was "just Dale Carnegie with a bit of middle-European cultural whipped cream on top". Woody Allen Americanized Continental nihilism for the movies. Much of this argument can be encapsulated in Bloom's image of the beaming face of Louis Armstrong as he sang "Mack the Knife" seemingly unaware that he was expressing a form of sado-masochistic nihilism popularized under the Weimar republic:

> Our stars are singing a song they do not understand, translated from a German original and having a huge popular success with unknown but wide-ranging consequences, as something of the original message touches something in American souls. But behind it all, the master lyricists are Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Americans, he argues, dance unwittingly to the tune of German philosophers, and the tune

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KRISHAN KUMAR
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Krishan Kumar's *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* is a rich compilation of his reflections on and his sociological knowledge of industrial society. He approaches utopia as a historian of ideas. No grand theory emerges in the book and, given the diversity of utopias, perhaps only the vaguest grand theory is possible, such as Bloch's "principle of hope". But Kumar composes an elaborate jigsaw of modern hopes and fears, juxtaposing many post-Enlightenment developments – rationalism, science, technology, mass production, planning, the growth of conglomerates, the rise of fascism and Stalinism, the "failure" of socialism. The utopias of modern times are at their most portentous as symptoms of these underlying infections of society and intellectual life.

The book delineates the relation of science to utopianism and especially anti-utopianism. The "Science – good or evil?" debate both echoes and emerges from the "ancients and moderns" controversy of the Enlightenment. Kumar anatomizes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as an early anti-science anti-utopia. The debate continued – humanists versus scientists, Russell versus Haldane, ecologists versus technocrats – and invaded the political sphere: the twentieth-century anti-utopia is an invention to combat socialism viewed as "the fullest and most sophisticated expression of the modern worship of science". Kumar also explores the perpetual urge towards élitism, and its direct connection with the status of science: if knowledge is power, then scientists must rule utopia, whether as the engineers of a Saint-Simonian parliament, the Samurai of Wells's *Modern Utopia* or the behavioural psychologists of Skinner's *Walden Two*. Their hubristic counterparts are the World Controllers of *Brave New World*.

The anti-utopian temperament, Kumar maintains, is not merely conservatism, but a

reputation, wealth, sensual pleasure, social convention and popular belief. But in liberating the mind from the illusions of the local community, Bloom observes, "the theoretical life has an almost impossible public relations problem". The community, feeling understandably threatened, may strike out at philosophy, as Athens did at Socrates. But with a little discretion, indeed gentle deception, the philosophical tradition has usually managed to sustain itself, and has never ceased to inquire into the good, the nature of man and other fundamental questions which have in the modern world come to be obscured by a confused relativism.

Bloom's account of the crisis of the West, which is the crisis of modernity itself, consists in a special version of the history of ideas, a compressed account of what Leo Strauss taught his students at Chicago, where Bloom himself now teaches. Any summary of such a summary will teeter on absurdity, but we may briefly say that modernity begins with Machiavelli's rejection of philosophical timidity: the philosophers have only, as it were, built imaginary principalities, whereas the task is to take over the world. But such a world could only be second-rate, not at all like Plato's city laid up in heaven. Bloom's account of Enlightenment (he drops the definite article) is that it popularized philosophy in such doctrines as those of the rights of man. Philosophy spread, inevitably, only in a debased form. It abandoned the quest for the good in favour of taking its bearings from the passions of men – passions intently studied by Hobbes and Locke, whose work generated the bourgeois societies of the modern world. It is these passions, alias history and culture, whose slipping free from the comprehensive vision of the classical philosophy of human nature has spread into the world and produced the enervating nihilism which Nietzsche exposed.

The Closing of the American Mind is in many ways a brilliant book which deserves to be taken seriously. But it will certainly be found disorientating by some readers. For one thing, it never seems to end up in the direction it points to. Much of its tone of hostility to the modern world might well invoke the call for a religious revival, but Bloom's massive silence on the whole subject of Christianity is a most conspicuous feature of the argument. Instead, philosophy, conceived as the pursuit of the good, is the only source of regeneration. Yet the account of philosophy also has its ambiguities, for Nietzsche, the patron of nihilism, emerges as the hero of the reaction against modernity. Does philosophy, then, lead us out of Plato's cave, or is it merely the case that the nihilistic conclusions to which philosophy leads are not for the uninstructed, who cannot live without myth, religion, ideology? Again, while Bloom repudiates the Marxism which he found so destructive of American universities in the 1960s, his own criticism of the modern world, which is identified as the world of the bourgeois, has a lot in common with what Marx taught. The reason is that Bloom and Marx are both backward-looking critics of modernity who yearn to revive the shattered world of classical Greece. What is wrong with modern Marxism, as Bloom tells it, is that it has been "Nietzscheanized". It has turned into a merely destructive version of the ubiquitous value-relativism. Questions of this sort will tease the mind of any reader of Bloom's book, while the British reader will observe that this is an account of a *mésalliance* between German high culture and American low taste, in which the distinctively British element in modern thought hardly appears. Had it done so, a significantly different story could have been told. Above all, perhaps, the reader prepared to overlook the occasional idiosyncrasy and to be stimulated by this *tour de force* will be exhilarated by an evaluation of the modern world through a belief, now almost everywhere discarded, in the perennial character of the questions and answers of classical philosophy.

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"perennial philosophy" whose target is hubris. Anti-utopians may applaud reason, science and equality, but deplore their manipulation. A utopia is perfect, its obverse is merely "perfected"; whereas utopia is ideal, anti-utopia is the tyranny of an idea. Furthermore, what is utopia for some is anti-utopia for others: the two modes are incestuously related and mutually permeable – in Wells, Huxley and Orwell, utopian and anti-utopian impulses warred constantly.

Kumar provides both an erudite account of the aetiology and development of modern utopianism, and also five self-sufficient essays on Bellamy, Wells, Huxley, Orwell and Skinner. His association-of-ideas approach reveals how faithfully utopias and anti-utopias mirror contemporary controversies and intellectual fashions. He also unravels the dialogue between utopian authors; Huxley and Orwell criticized each other's anti-utopias but were joined in common cause against the scientistic optimism of Wells. One problem for Kumar is that such prolific authors left little unsaid about their own work; indeed, to reassess Huxley's anti-utopia, he need do no more than quote from *Brave New World Revisited*. But as an intellectual biographer, Kumar affords fruitful insights: Huxley believed that democracy was a sham, based on an absurd premiss of equality, that Original Sin, *qua* anti-social urges, is "scientifically" true and that "the ideal state is . . . a material democracy controlled by an aristocracy of intellect".

Most provocative is Kumar's reinstatement of the much-derided *Walden Two*, the behaviourist's paradise. He shows the force of B. F. Skinner' critique of liberalism which, while directing the weapon of freedom against overt oppression, has left us vulnerable to the hidden persuaders. He concludes that Skinner did well to rescue eugenics, planning and behavioural conditioning from "their disfigurement within Nazism and Stalinism" and to discover their utopian potential.

Kumar follows Mannheim in asserting that utopias are in decline in our century, although he does this only by discounting a healthy number of recent science-fiction and feminist utopias. He suggests that utopias were displaced by social theory in the nineteenth century because utopians expected the imminent realization of their plans: futurology produces no utopias for the same reason. Another explanation suggests itself, however. With the ending of what the Manuels in *Utopian Thought in the Western World* call the "pansophism" of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the accelerating specialization of the sciences and social sciences and the pervasiveness of professionalism, all social theory, even utopianism, must wear academic dress to gain respectability. Many utopians may be holed up in ivory towers. Kumar notes the "fragmentation" of contemporary utopias, usually addressed to specific audiences such as feminists or ecologists. This too does not signify the end of utopianism. The political pluralism and diversity of high-technology society may have precipitated this diffusion, along with socialism's inability to maintain its standing as the sole opponent of capitalism, but minority utopias are still utopias. Even if utopias were to be seen as waning, academic commentary is not. Kumar's select bibliography lists some seventy Anglo-Saxon post-war works on utopianism; had he looked to France and Germany he could have added another fifty. Such copious meta-utopianizing must signify that the utopian impulse remains strong.

A possible explanation for the "vanishing utopia" thesis stems from the utopia/religion dialectic. While "there is in principle a fundamental contradiction between religion and utopia", because of religion's horror of hubris and its other-worldly aspirations, Kumar finds a path to utopia through the Judaic vision of the New Jerusalem and Christian millenarianism. A climate of religious inspiration and fervour nurtures utopianism and thus Christianity is "the unconscious of utopia". Kumar concludes that without "the structure of sentiment and belief" which religion provides, utopia cannot flourish. This recalls MacIntyre's thesis, in *After Virtue*, that without the *telos*, the vision of "man-as-he-could-be", which was hitherto inspired by religion, post-Enlightenment moral philosophy foundered. Ultimately, utopianism may be another victim of the loss of the vision of human potential.